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CATTLE-TENDING AND AGRICULTURE IN THE AVESTA

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IN THE ACCOUNTS of the religion of Zoroaster and of the people among whom he expounded his new faith, we find the statement that the Persians were at that time a people who not only had herds and flocks, but tilled the soil as well. For convenience, I condense somewhat from the chapter on Agriculture in Geiger's *Civilization of the Eastern Iranians*:¹

Only the cultivated ground is the property of Mazdah. Regions devoid of cultivation are haunted by evil spirits. Therefore, wherever a follower of the Avestan religion settles, it is his first duty to render the soil productive. It is a triumph of the good cause whenever a portion of land is by irrigation wrung from the death-like desert and made productive. The draining of swamps, which was necessary in some parts of Persia, was equally as meritorious as irrigation. The religion of Mazdah invites its adherents to ceaseless activity in agriculture no less than in other pursuits. It bids them fight against sterility and barrenness, and create instead of them affluence and culture. The genius of the earth is said to rejoice when the earth is tilled and corn is produced, and to mourn when it remains sterile. The earth is like a woman, who misses her vocation when she grows old childless, but who is proud in happiness and beauty when healthy sons owe their lives to her. Besides the cultivation of grain, there are indications that hay was grown as winter fodder for the cattle, and that fruit-bearing plants were cultivated; whether the last included fruit-trees, cannot be determined. Nothing which we can infer from the Avesta as to the agricultural practices of the ancient Iranians is inconsistent with the present-day practices, and many of the present-day peculiarities are seen to be of very ancient origin.²

¹ Wilhelm Geiger, *Civilization of the Eastern Iranians in Ancient Times*, translated by Darab Dastur Peshotan Sanjana (1885), 196-211.

² See especially Vd. 3; 5. 5; 6. 6; 9. 53-57; 14. 12; 17. 3. Many of the passages cited by Geiger *l. c.* can no longer be interpreted as containing all

But none of the specifically agricultural passages of the Avesta occur in its oldest portions, the Gāthās and the sacred prayers, which are distinguishable by their linguistic peculiarities as well as to a certain extent by their subject matter. We find in them the Ox-Creator (*ḡeuš tašā*) (*Yn.* 29. 2; 31. 9; 46. 9), the Ox-Soul pleading for a protector against the Raiding Violence (*aēšma*) of the robber hordes from the North, the appointment of Zarathushtā to this service (*Yn.* 29), and the Prophet's constant exhortation to the people to care for the cattle and for the pastures and to defend their herds against the evil followers of the Druj.³ But there is in these Gāthās not one word which is of a distinctly agricultural meaning. Plants (*urvarā-*) are indeed mentioned (*Yn.* 44. 4; 51. 7), but obviously as intended for the food of cattle (*Yn.* 48. 6).

The technical terminology of cattle-tending, as found in the Gāthās, is quite simple, and does not suggest the tillage of the soil. From a root which is manifestly connected with the German *Weide*,⁴ we find *vāstar-* 'herdsman' (*Yn.* 29. 1), also in the figurative sense which English 'shepherd' has acquired (*Yn.* 27. 13); *vāstra-* 'pasture,' either as fodder (*Yn.* 29. 2) or as land;^{4a} *vāstrya-* 'pertaining to pasturing' (*Yn.* 29. 1; 33. 6), or, as substantivized adjective, 'he who practises the pasturing <of cattle>' (*Yn.* 29. 6; 31. 9 bis, 10, 15; 51. 5; 53. 4); *vāstravant-* 'provided with pasture' (*Yn.* 48. 11; 50. 2). Another root (seemingly identical with that in Skt. *paśu-*, Av. *pasav-*, Lat. *pecu* or *pecus*, Germ. *Vieh*) appears in the verb *fšav-* 'to feed or fatten <cattle>' (*Yn.* 48. 5), with a present participle *fšuyant-* 'cattle-fattening, cattle-tending' (*Yn.* 29. 5; 49. 4); in

the significance which he puts into them. As a corrective one may consult Fritz Wolff, *Avesta, die heiligen Bücher der Parsen übersetzt* (1910), and Chr. Bartholomae, *Altiranisches Wörterbuch* (1904).

³ *Yn.* 31. 15; 33. 4-6; 34. 5, 14; 44. 20; 49. 4; 51. 5, 14; etc. The texts are conveniently accessible in English in J. H. Moulton, *Early Zoroastrianism* (1913), 343-390 and in German in Chr. Bartholomae, *Die Gāthā's des Awesta* (1905).

⁴ Vide Bartholomae, *AiW.* 1413-1417.

^{4a} *Yn.* 32. 10; 33. 3, 4; 44. 20; 47. 3; 51. 14. Bartholomae's 'Weidewirtschaft, überh. Landwirtschaft' (*AiW.* 1414) is not necessitated by any one of the three passages which he cites; in *Yn.* 44. 20 and 51. 14, the word may perfectly well mean simply 'the pasture land,' and in *Yn.* 58. 4 it denotes the personification of the pasture land.

one passage this participle is used as an adjective to *vāstrya-* (*Yn.* 31. 10), while in another place it is a substantive coördinate with *vāstrya-* (*Yn.* 29. 6).

If we turn next to the second-oldest portion of the Avesta, the so-called Sevenfold Gāthā (*Yn.* 35. 3 to 41. 6), we find there mention of cattle and their pasturage (*Yn.* 35. 4, 7; 37. 1-2), of the domestic animals (*Yn.* 39. 1), of the useful wild animals (*Yn.* 39. 2), of plants (*Yn.* 37. 1) and of water (*Yn.* 37. 1; 38. 3)—but again there is nothing which is conclusively agricultural rather than pastoral.

There are certain other chapters of the Yasna which show by their language a certain antiquity, but are proved by their defective syntax to be of later date.⁵ In them we find mention of cattle and of cattle-pasturing (*Yn.* 12. 2, 3, 7; 13. 2; 58. 4), of domestic animals (*Yn.* 58. 6), of plants (*Yn.* 12. 7), and of good water (*Yn.* 56. 2-4)—but still nothing decisively of agricultural nature.

In the remaining or later portions of the Avesta are found the passages on which Geiger based his account of agriculture among the ancient Iranians, or, at least, all the passages which still have assured relevancy to the subject, in view of the present status of the interpretation.

But in order to draw proper inferences from these facts, one must bear in mind the history of those texts which make up the Avesta, as actually preserved to us at the present time. Whatever the date of Zarathushtra may have been, the Holy Scriptures of the faith which he founded were preserved apparently without loss until the conquest of Persia by Alexander. In the confusion of that time, according to the story, the authoritative copy *de luxe* was destroyed by the invaders. The Zoroastrian faith went into an eclipse from which it emerged only in the third century of the Christian era, when the Sassanian line came to the royal throne. Under the direction of the rulers of this dynasty, the scattered Avestan texts, some presumably in fragmentary manuscripts and others preserved merely by oral tradition, were reassembled and edited into a reasonable unity. A portion only of this has come down to us, since far the larger part was lost at the time of the Mohammedan conquest of the

⁵ *Yn.* 12, 13, 14, 56, 58; cf. Reichelt, *Awestisches Elementarbuch*, § 11.

seventh century, and in later centuries when the Zoroastrians were striving to preserve their religious independence.

The Sassanian redaction of the Avesta did not however fairly represent the preachings of Zarathushtra. Even before the Greek conquest, the monotheism of the faith had been impaired by the introduction of Anahita and Mithra to share the honors of Ahuramazdah; and at some period, not precisely definable, the *haoma-orgies* against which Zarathushtra protested with utmost vigor (*Yn.* 32. 14; 48. 10), were foisted upon the new religion, and exposure of dead bodies to be devoured by birds and beasts replaced ordinary burial. This is not the place to go into detail upon the changes suffered by the faith after the time of its Prophet; all this has been admirably done by Moulton.⁶ We must bear in mind, for the present purpose, merely that we cannot rely upon anything but the *Gāthās* and the oldest prayers to give us evidence on the original doctrines.

Now, as we have seen, the oldest parts of the Avesta are absolutely barren of references to agriculture. When plants are mentioned, it is in such a combination as 'cattle, water, and plants,' which seems rather to suggest that the vegetation spoken of is that of the pasture-lands; though this, it should be admitted, is not necessarily so. On the other hand, we must not hastily conclude that the early Iranians, to whom Zarathushtra preached his sermons, were a purely pastoral people who had no acquaintance with the tilling of the soil. The common vocabulary of the Indo-Europeans and prehistoric archaeology indicate that the folk of the hypothetical Indo-European unity cultivated one or more of the cereal grains, and we must not assume for the Iranians an entire regression from that status. In the *Gāthās* we find a fourfold division of the people into local units, namely the home, the clan, the district, the land (*dəmāna*, *vis-*, *šōiθra-*, *dahyu-*, *Yn.* 31. 18), and a threefold social division into *xvaētu*-, *vərəzəna*-, *airyaman*-, of somewhat puzzling interpretation;⁷ these divisions distinctly imply a fairly complex civilization, which could hardly be still in the purely pastoral stage.

⁶ J. H. Moulton, *Early Zoroastrianism* (1913).

⁷ *Yn.* 32. 1; 33. 4. Cf. Moulton, *op. cit.*, 355, ftn. 2.

My conclusion is therefore as follows: The people to whom Zarathushtra was preaching were a people whose herds and flocks were their main reliance, although agriculture was practised to a certain degree. But the herds were endangered by the raids of the lawless tribes to the North, and a perilous economic situation was arising. Zarathushtra appreciated the situation, and preached a reformed religion, basing its practical tenets on the care and defense of the cattle. The agricultural situation was not a serious one, and therefore received no attention from him. The Zoroastrian or Mazdayasnian religion was proclaimed to meet an economic crisis.

Not that the Prophet himself would thus have conceived it. He preached good deeds, good thoughts, good words, and set up a high standard of spiritual excellence; yet the practical expression of it all was found in the protection of the cattle. Quite naturally, with the increasing importance of agriculture in the region, the laws of the faith received accretions which tended to promote the cultivation of the fields; of this character are the Avestan passages which reflect agriculture.